

Full of Self-Emptying

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Philippians 2:1-13

I love to sing. And I will sing anything. In fact, one day while I was working at a camp in southern Indiana I decided that life should be an opera, and that I would sing my way through the rest of the work day. Most campers looked shocked when I gave them canoeing instructions in song, some did find it amusing, but whatever else the kids might have thought, *I felt* it livened things up... and I got enough chuckles to keep me going. I realized quickly, however, that it takes a lot to sing your way through everything—like, for instance, excusing yourself for the restroom. Opera and toilets are a tough combo.

I am also guilty of interjecting song lyrics, either in song, “That’s just the way it is,” or as awkward prose, “It’s the end of the world as we know it, I feel fine.” Maybe some of you find yourselves singing in the car or in the shower, or both. Sometimes I find myself singing great hymns like “Amazing Grace,” and other times I belt out lyrics from an N*Sync song that I still remember from middle school.

No matter how good I am, no matter how musically savvy I may or may not be, the truth is, despite it all, and sometimes against better judgment, *I sing. I love to sing.* There is something about song that speaks to me, and I think song can express what words alone can not.

Sometimes the words or music are not what stir inside me, but *the context* from which the song arises. For instance, the hymn “It Is Well With My Soul” is a poetically powerful piece that awakens me to God’s goodness despite trouble, difficulty, and the downright evil experienced in life. But the way this hymn came to be, the context which gave rise to the words and insights of this song transform my experience of singing it altogether.

The words were penned by a Chicago Presbyterian lawyer named Horatio Spafford. Having already experienced his son’s death, his family was virtually ruined financially by the Chicago fire of 1871. Then, two years later, he sent his four daughters and wife to Europe for health reasons, hoping to join them after completing some urgent business. Before leaving to meet his family, he received a message from his wife reading “saved alone.” He soon learned that the ship carrying his family had been struck

by an English vessel and his four daughters had drowned.

In December of 1873, while traveling across the Atlantic to meet his wife so they might grieve together, the ship's captain pointed out to Horatio Spafford where his children had drowned. In that very place, shattered by great loss, Horatio Spafford wrote the lyrics of this great hymn, in which we sing, "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul."¹

As far back as I can remember, songs and hymns were always a part of Sunday worship. And as I've worshiped in different congregations and in different religious traditions, I've discovered that songs and hymns often give a tradition its distinctive flavor.

This morning, in our reading from Philippians, we may have unwittingly glimpsed into the early Christian church through an ancient hymn. In verses 6-11 of Philippians 2 there is a poetic, rhythmic quality to Paul's words that caused one scholar, many years ago to hypothesize that these verses pre-existed Paul's letter as a kind of hymn or creed.² Since then scholarship has mostly affirmed his thesis; and we can see this ourselves by noticing that the translators of our NIV pew bible set apart and structured those verses like poetry. We may have before us a hymn or creed of one of the earliest Christian communities.

This hymn is so fascinating because, on the one hand, it is a door for us to enter into the worship and liturgy of the pre-New Testament church; to see what it is they might have sung or recited, to hear their witness and their story. But, on the other hand, the hymn is also so fascinating because its contents have been a source for historical debate regarding Jesus as Christ. Trinitarian discussions about whether Christ was one substance, a similar substance, or a different substance from God—all of which is very confusing even to the sharpest minds—generated immense controversy. Our passage in Philippians offered some of the fodder for that debate. The controversies and debates led to the great councils which issued some very important creedal statements in Christian history—like the Nicene

1 For a very concise summary of this story, see "Peace in Adversity" in the *Chalice Hymnal: Worship Leader's Edition* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 561.

2 See Ernst Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil 2:5-11* (SHAW Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Jahrgang 1927/28; 4. Abhandlung; Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961 [1928]). For a brief discussion of Lohmeyer's thesis in relation to scholarship since then, see the article by Joseph A. Marchal, *Expecting a Hymn, Encountering An Argument: Introducing the Rhetoric of Philippians and Pauline Interpretation*.

Creed, for example.³

But let us ask ourselves, what might we find buried in this hymn? Why does Paul recite *these words*?

I want to suggest several things for us to think about this morning. First, the hymn points us toward a way of seeing God through Christ. Second, and because of seeing God through Christ, Paul uses the hymn to reinforce how he thinks Christians ought to live. Finally, I want to suggest that understanding God through Christ in this hymn offers us a distinctive way of living and being which both *heals our souls* and *changes our goals*.

So let us return to the hymn. What might we uncover there? We discover, very quickly I think, a Christ who does not exploit power and status, but who seeks *humility*. Christ embodies humility, all the way to the cross. In a world concerned with power, status, and standing, this is a challenging message. And, unfortunately, our human concerns with power, status, and standing often creep into our theology, in both welcomed and undetected forms.

I've learned from the Lutherans two categories through which we might classify theology.⁴ We might talk about theology in terms of *Theologia Crucis* and *Theologia Glorie*, or a Theology of the Cross and a Theology of Glory. I've heard many sermons and heard many conversations espousing a Theology of Glory: a theology which trumpets the power and might of God seen especially in the triumphal resurrection. Often, we hear of a God of ultimate control and unimaginable majesty, of unsurpassed strength and complete dominance. This is a God deserving our praise, a God glorified and lifted up. A God very much above and beyond this world, though cosmically in control of it.

But such a theology, I believe, should not stand on its own, lest we forget what it is that hangs in our sanctuaries and reaches above our church rooftops; not a thrown, but a *cross*. A *theologia gloriae* that forgets the cross is, I think, a dangerous theology. And theologies of glory that stand alone can easily

3 The Council of Nicea (325 CE) considered matters about whether Christ was *homoousios* (one substance) or *homoiousios* (similar substance) with God. The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), convened to consider the humanity of Jesus, stating that the Trinity had one nature (one *ousia*) but three persons (three *hypostases*). Jesus was considered *both* fully God *and* fully human. All of the complex metaphysics involved in these considerations can be nauseatingly difficult. What many wrestled with were the tensions found in Scripture about the relationship between God, Jesus, and the holy spirit. They tried to interpret these tensions in a coherent (and very metaphysical) way.

4 These “types” or *topos* are not the only schema possible for making sense of Christian theology; however, I would argue they serve an important and irreplaceable function in understanding (traditionally) fundamental Christian symbols and their implications for human life.

be formed to fit agendas of imperialistic strength and economic exploitation. In serving a God seen as ultimately and unboundedly powerful, God is allowed to be identified with those who are the most powerful in this world—power identifies with power. This becomes the breeding ground for the strong and privileged to leverage a theological weight in their pursuit of glory—human glory is identified with God's Glory.

Our ancient hymn this morning transforms what we know God's "Glory" to be, and reorients us as a result. Most importantly, our hymn reminds us of the God we know through Jesus Christ—one who died on a cross. For Christ did not consider the status of God something to be sought after or "exploited" (verse 6). Christ did not claim for himself the Glory of God, but instead did something much different—in verse 7 Christ *emptied himself*. Christ became a *slave*. This language is so important. Christ emptied himself to become a slave, not picking up a crown of glory but taking upon himself a cross of humiliation. This self-emptied slave humbled himself to death upon a cross.

I think we have lost just how radical this notion really is. We might move through the motions of coming to church, observing the two beams of the cross on our sanctuary, singing about crucifixion, and taking part in communion "remembering" something about a body and blood. The cross is so familiar, so regular, so Christian. But the "familiar" can desensitize us—doing something over and over again, seeing something over and over again, hearing something over and over again can lead us to think we understand fully and completely exhausted the meaning of these familiar things.

Familiarity can keep us from attending to the depth and power of the infinitely inexhaustible Christian symbols.

In addition, things like crucifixion are culturally and historically so foreign to us. Most likely, we have not witnessed a crucifixion, we don't know what that's like. Our only exposure to such a thing might be the bible and church. Church-talk about the cross happens so routinely that we might fail to grasp just how profound it really is. We always risk losing the radical message of the cross in the familiarity of religious routine and the historical distance of the event.

But imagine, we have on our sanctuary wall something like an electric chair, a firing squad's collection of weapons, a gallows. We have hanging in our sanctuary an instrument of cruelty, shame, and death that was reserved for *rebels* and *disobedient slaves*.

Oh the irony, oh the strangeness. For one slave was, in fact, *not disobedient*, but was instead obedient to death on a cross (verse 8)! This slave did not take for himself status or honor, but emptied himself of such things and humbly bore human likeness (verse 7). This slave, Jesus Christ, was crucified, and we know—don't we?—gods are not crucified. Gods do not die. How utterly mystifying. How amazing.

Only then, only *after* the self-emptying one has been enslaved on a cross do we hear of Glory—Glory has been forever changed. For God *then* “exalted him” and gave him the name above every other (verse 9): that name is Lord (verse 11). Here again the irony, the strangeness. The name “Lord” in Greek is *kyrios*. It's most common English translation is “Lord” or “Master.” The opposite of a *kyrios* is a *doulos*—a “slave” or “servant.” In seeking humility and finding death on a cross, the slave, Jesus Christ, became our Master. The instrument reserved for a *disobedient* slave was filled by an *obedient* one. The Christ who could have sought the Glory of God instead *emptied himself* of any such claim. And now, the irony of the cross is its very place in and above churches all over the world.

We see in Christ, through this hymn, the ironic God of the Cross. Where we expect to find Glory and a throne, we find humility and a cross. Where we expect to find a disobedient slave, we find an obedient one. And the one who became a slave is, instead, Lord. The irony of the Cross is the unexpectedness found there. Glory is found on the Cross. The Cross is Glory.

Our hymn opens up for us a way of seeing God: through the humility and self-emptying of Christ *we see God*. Paul takes the power and poetry of these verses to encourage the Philippian church to live in a certain way. He urges the Philippians to be of “one mind” (verses 3). He asks that they live in humility and accord with one another by embodying the “same mind” (verse 3), a mind they not only share with each other, but can share with Christ Jesus (verse 5). To be clear, the church community is not being asked to believe the same things, to live the exact same way, or to have *uniformity*. The church is not exhorted to have the same social, political, or economic commitments, though those commitments may be challenged and shaped by the gospel message. Instead, Paul exhorts the Philippians to be humble and consider others. “The mind of Christ” which the Philippian church is asked to embody is made powerfully clear by the hymn in which we find Christ's humility and self-emptying.

Paul sees the radical example of Christ not as a strict act to follow—for Paul does not suggest that anyone be nailed to a cross. By extension, I do not suggest that we nail ourselves to pieces of wood.

Rather, the “mind of Christ,” the humility of the self-emptying one, is ours to *heal us* and to *reorient us*. It cleanses and heals us of our disillusioned claims to power and might. It prevents us from stumbling through life with the unnecessary burdens of clamoring after human fame, glory, and power. No, in emptying ourselves we make room for salvation. This healing then empowers us as we live out in humility the ways of God.

The church, this community, is called into a unity grounded in the humility of Christ who lives within us.

What might all this mean for us, in a more concrete way, as we live and move in our daily existence and as we worship together in church?

In a conference about church leadership and authority, a professor once remarked that seeking authority directly is “coercive” and “manipulative.” Authority always and necessarily involves power, and directly seeking power over someone is a very dangerous task. One should, instead, seek to be good at a certain skill, like teaching or biking or managing, and authority will follow (it will be granted, in a sense).⁵ I think this logic is true of humility and Glory. When we seek out glory we take part in a self-serving manipulative game. Glory is not to be sought—for Christ himself did not lay claim to it. Instead, we seek after humility, and in being truly humble, we can sense the light of Glory shining upon us from above—bestowed by God, the source and end of Glory. For it is through the humility and self-emptying of Christ that we see God, and through our own humility and self-emptying that it is possible for us to participate with God in God’s glorious purposes.

The hymn and words of Paul indicate for us, I believe, that our lives in the church and beyond should be lives of humility. We must make room for God, we must empty ourselves. We must empty ourselves of any claim we might have to glory—social, political, economic, intellectual—and in humility take up the tasks God calls us to pursue. In this way, we “work out our own salvation in fear and trembling” (verse 12). For “it is God who is at work in us” (verse 13)—not ourselves—and it is God who fills us again. Only now, we are filled to overflowing with the self-emptying one, the Christ, who gives us healing, courage, strength, and determination to overcome our most difficult

⁵ Rev. Dr. William Schweiker was a panelist at the conference *Intimacy and Authority* held at the University of Chicago Divinity School on September 26th, 2008. It was sponsored by the Border Crossings through a grant from the Lily Endowment. I am referencing his comments made at this conference.

circumstances and live into God's purposes. The Cross is Glory. Glory is the Cross.

When we are filled with self-emptying, when we have cleared ourselves for God to move and act, we might find words alone inadequate. *For when we seek humility and let God bestow the Glory, when we embody the “mind of Christ” despite the circumstances—no matter how good or bad life is—*

we might find that words alone will not do, and we must sing from the depth of our being,

“it is well, it is well with my soul.”

Amen.